OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Environment
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Joint Subcommittee Hearing
"Status of Reforms to EPA's Integrated Risk Information System"

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for testifying before our subcommittees today. I want to start by emphasizing on behalf of my side of the aisle that we are not anti-chemical or opposed to the development of new chemicals – we simply want to assure that scientific information is available to determine the health effects that might result from exposure. This is about protecting human health.

The Integrated Risk Information System, IRIS, was intended to be a database that would provide a comprehensive source of best information on the health risks of chemicals. Approximately seven hundred new chemicals enter the market every year, joining about 85,000 industrial chemicals already in use. Companies that manufacture, distribute, or use these chemicals are not required to demonstrate that the chemicals are safe.

When a company wants to introduce a new chemical, the company notifies the EPA, but the company is not required to share any data regarding the safety of that chemical. EPA cannot even request safety data unless it can show there is a potential risk by pointing to available academic or industry data. It often takes many years before harms associated with a chemical can begin to be identified, thus there is no good public safety check in place.

There is what seems to be an obvious need for transparency. Despite that, since the 1990s the chemical industry appears to have used strategies to try to slow IRIS entries, tie EPA up in lengthy reviews and interagency dialogues, and generally cast doubt on claims that a particular chemical might have an adverse health effect. For example, during the Bush Administration, the Office of Management and Budget hired a toxicologist and an epidemiologist to run so-called "peer reviews" of draft IRIS entries, a policy that resulted in endless requests from OMB that EPA go back and look at different literature or make minor changes to their findings. The Bush Administration also created an interagency review process that allowed agencies with significant pollution problems to challenge the EPA IRIS drafts. Production of new IRIS assessments was so slow that GAO put IRIS on their "watch list," and there was a bipartisan push to let EPA take control of their program and expand their productivity.

The Obama Administration sought to strengthen IRIS, and moved OMB into the background while lessening unnecessary interagency review mechanisms. The response from those who are opposed to IRIS's work has been to call on the National Research Council to continually review IRIS assessments. The NRC was drawn into IRIS several times prior to the 2011 Formaldehyde review. In each case they largely supported EPA's findings, but offered advice about how to

complete more systematic reviews and how to improve the science assessments. Invariably, the overall endorsements of EPA's findings were lost in the noise about what EPA did not do or could have done better.

The 2011 report was a little different. The National Research Council (NRC) used that report to praise the substantial improvements made by EPA thus far, and offer a road map for how to make IRIS more efficient, and to accelerate and streamline the assessments. EPA embraced the advice of the NRC and, as the most recent report acknowledges, has made significant progress in putting into place the process reforms recommended in 2011.

Now we are faced with a necessary question: what is the National Academy's off-ramp strategy for getting out of the business of doing endless IRIS reviews? Organizations such as the American Chemistry Council may have an interest in keeping IRIS unproductive, and discrediting its work could keep the Academy busy as every NRC report offers an opportunity for criticisms about the quality of the science at EPA. At this point, I am very interested to hear whether the Academy has reached the end of its productive contributions. If they have not reached that point, where might that point be?

Frankly the combination of the 2011 report and the new leadership at the National Center for Environmental Assessment, which has focused on building a better relationship with industry, has had the effect of crippling IRIS rather than putting the EPA on a path to streamlined production of IRIS entries. In fact, unless changes are implemented, it may very well cripple the program as much as when OMB was involved with repeated "peer reviews." So I am very interested to hear from Dr. Olden about what he intends to do to get production of IRIS assessments moving.

I look forward to the testimony from each of the witnesses. But importantly, this Committee needs to hear how we are going to get out of the way and let EPA do its job of producing assessments of chemicals that are suspected of and may be causing harm to our constituents and our communities.